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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"*****"

"Saying it like it is!"

Unless you've been in seclusion due to the horrible wintry weather over the past couple of weeks, you've probably been aware of Egypt's President Mubarak. This has been history in the making, brought on by massive protests by the citizens of that Middle East country. Actually, I'm surprised at the quick (more or less) decision that Mubarak made; and the fact that this event was fairly non-violent. I'm not sure how this will be remembered in the history books, but I'm fairly sure that some reports will show that the internet played some role. I think that this will be borne out partially due to the fact that Egypt "killed" the internet in that country for almost a week, likely attempting to minimize news of what was happening in the country. The "power" of the internet is certainly amazing. Regardless of how it will be recorded, Egypt faces a new era of leadership - hopefully a democratic one that will help to maintain or create better stability in that part of the world!

On the local front, we had more snow here over the past week, but merely an "event" of inconvenience more than anything else. A couple of inches, which compared to the average of a foot or more each storm in the past, this really wasn't much. It's been really cold, as well, but the long range forecast calls for a couple of days near 50 degrees next week. Finally, some relief in sight, although being a long-time resident of New England, I'm not too optimistic that Spring is just around the corner!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone, and yes, I missed another column. Things just never seem to fall into place anymore. It used to be that you could count on at least a couple of things going right. But no more.

Yeah, I know, it sounds fatalistic, but things are getting kind of crazy

out there. One need look no farther than the newspapers (or any news site online) to see what's happening.

First of all, let's spend a line or two on the health care plan. A lot of time and effort and, therefore, money were spent over about two years to get this puppy passed. It finally got through and made into law. Although I don't think that most of us really know what the plan holds for us, and there's a lot of misinformation out there about it, I think it's a good thing. Sure, it may require some 'tweaking'... I'd be surprised if it didn't... but in general, I think we'll all be better off with it than without it.

I'll be quite honest with you, this plan is not what I wanted. I had envisioned something much more... citizen friendly and much less insurance company protective. Sure, insurance companies deserve to make money, but health insurance is something that shouldn't be a cash cow. I would have liked to have seen provisions for tax incentives for companies that donate technology, know-how, and even intellectual property like drug patents for 'the common good'. Provisions that make it attractive for companies that make medical equipment to donate or offer at discounts the things they produce. I could imagine a company realizing the benefits of tax 'write-offs'... lots of companies see the benefit now... but let's make it a little sweeter. Double the tax write-off.

We could do the same thing with drugs. You're probably aware of drug programs at drug and grocery store chains and stores like Walmart that allow you to get a 90 day supply of certain generic drugs for about ten bucks. That's a good thing, right? Sure it is. It's good for everyone. The drug companies get their product out there, the stores get people coming in to save money... and maybe spend what they've saved while in the store. And the insurance companies make out too. If you're like me, your prescription plan (if you're lucky enough to have one) has a \$15 co-pay. And the insurance companies will only cover a 30 day supply. So if you need a prescription that happens to be on "the list", you can get three times as much of your medicine for two thirds of the cost to you. So why do insurance companies like it? Simple... the 10 bucks comes out of your pocket, not theirs. You're still paying your insurance premiums and getting your medicine, but they don't pay a dime because you always pay up to the first 15 dollars anyway. I don't have a problem with that.

But what if.. what if we could get the drug companies to supply more drugs... more kinds of drugs... for lower prices? Sounds good, right? Right. But how do we do that? Well, how about the old tried and true tax incentives? I doubt there's a company in the entire country that wouldn't like a tax break. Give 'em one. Maybe some of them will be smart and use bigger donations and price cuts as a marketing tool and increase sales, which increases production, which increases jobs and equipment purchases, all of which increase the number of dollars they'd be paying in taxes... everybody wins.

Except the shareholders. Y'know what? Too bad. We've gotten too accustomed to making a lot of money on stocks. Whatever happened to the days when you bought stock and were happy if you made a percent or so over a bank account? No, now everybody wants to retire like Getty and make a killing. You really can't blame people too much for that; everyone wants to make money. But when stock becomes a company's primary concern and not the product or service they provide, trust me, the whole system is going to collapse. Look at GM and the banks that needed bail-outs. They concentrated more on their stock offerings than their products. And look what happened.

Iconic 'Guitar Hero' Video Game Gets The Ax

These days, guns are more popular than guitars, at least when it comes to video games. The company behind "Guitar Hero" said Wednesday that it is pulling the plug on one of the most influential video game titles of the new century.

Activision Blizzard Inc., which also produces the "Call of Duty" series, is ending the "Guitar Hero" franchise after a run of more than five years. The move follows Viacom Inc.'s decision in November to sell its money-losing unit behind the "Rock Band" video games. Harmonix was sold to an investment firm for an undisclosed sum. Harmonix, incidentally, was behind the first "Guitar Hero" game.

Game industry analysts have long lamented the "weakness in the music genre," as they call it - that is, the inability of game makers to drum up demand for the products after an initial surge in popularity in the mid-2000s. Music games are often more expensive than your typical shoot-'em-up game because they require guitars, microphones and other musical equipment. While extra songs can be purchased for download, this hasn't been enough to keep the games profitable.

Activision's shares tumbled after the announcement, but investors appear more concerned with the company's disappointing revenue forecast than the demise of the rocker game. As far as investors go, discontinuing an unprofitable product isn't the end of the world, even if "Guitar Hero" fans disagree.

"In retrospect it was a \$3 billion or more business that everybody needed to buy, so they did, but they only needed to buy it once," said Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter. "It's much like 'Wii Fit.' Once you have it, you don't need to buy another one."

"Guitar Hero" was iconic and often praised for getting a generation weaned on video games into music. But its end after a mere half a decade is a big contrast to other influential video game franchises, such as the 25-year-old Mario series from Nintendo. "Call of Duty" first launched in 2003, two years before "Guitar Hero."

In a conference call, Activision said its restructuring will mean the loss of about 500 jobs in its Activision Publishing business, which has about 7,000 employees. But the company's overall work force numbers are not going to change much because it is hiring people elsewhere.

Activision did better than expected in the fourth quarter, which ended in December, but that already was anticipated. After all, it launched "Call of Duty: Black Ops" in November. That game, which is mostly set during the Vietnam War, made \$1 billion after just six weeks in stores. Its latest "World of Warcraft" game has also been doing well.

Bobby Kotick, Activision's CEO, said the company's big franchises "have larger audience bases than ever before and we continue to see significantly enhanced user activity and engagement for our expanding online communities." Revenue from so-called "digital channels" - that is, downloads, subscriptions and extra game content sold online - now accounts for 30 percent of the company's total revenue.

Activision said Wednesday it lost \$233 million, or 20 cents per share,

in the latest quarter, compared with a loss of \$286 million, or 23 cents per share, in the same period a year earlier. Net revenue fell to \$1.43 billion from \$1.56 billion.

Its adjusted earnings of 53 cents per share were better than last year's 49 cents and beat analysts' expectations of 51 cents, according to FactSet. Revenue that's been adjusted to account for games with online components was \$2.55 billion, up slightly from \$2.50 billion a year earlier and above analysts' \$2.25 billion forecast.

For the current quarter, which ends in March, Activision forecast adjusted earnings of 7 cents per share, and adjusted revenue of \$640 million. Analysts are looking for earnings of 10 cents per share on higher revenue of \$771 million.

Activision Blizzard also said its board authorized a new \$1.5 billion stock buyback plan. And it declared an annual dividend of 16.5 cents, an increase of 10 percent from the dividend it issued in February 2010, its first ever.

Blizzard Announces BlizzCon 2011

Attention all gamers: Just in case the past year hasn't quite satisfied your Blizzard fixation, what with the releases of StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty and World of Warcraft: Cataclysm, you'll get a few more chances before 2011 is out. Blizzard Entertainment has announced that its sixth BlizzCon gaming convention will be held this year on Friday, October 21, and Saturday, October 22, at the Anaheim Convention Center, in Anaheim, California.

This "celebration of the global player communities surrounding Blizzard Entertainment's Warcraft, StarCraft, and Diablo universes" lets gamers gather to get hands-on time with the latest Blizzard games; attend discussion panels with developers; participate in both casual and competitive tournaments, as well as contests with major prizes; buy merchandise based on Blizzard's games; and more.

Mike Morhaime, CEO and cofounder of Blizzard, said in a statement, "We look forward to holding another exciting BlizzCon this year, filled with some great entertainment and competition, as well as the latest news about Blizzard games. BlizzCon is built from the ground up with our community in mind; we're pleased to be able to host an event where players can come together to have fun and celebrate their passion for gaming."

For more information about BlizzCon 2011, and instructions on ticket pricing and purchasing procedures closer to the dates of the convention, visit the official Blizzard Web site, www.blizzard.com.

PS3 Hacker Must Turn Over Hard Drives to Sony, Judge Says

PlayStation 3 hacker George Hotz must hand over his computers to Sony lawyers as part of a temporary restraining order issued last month, a federal judge ruled Thursday.

Hotz had objected to the stipulation, arguing that Sony would be able to go through its contents, but U.S. District Judge Susan Illston was not convinced: "That's the breaks," she said, according to a report from Wired.

In late January, Illston granted Sony's request for a temporary restraining order against Hotz, who hacked the Sony PS3 and posted his circumvention technique on his Web site, as well as links for others to do the same. As part of the TRO, Hotz was banned from posting or distributing those links or information about his hacking techniques. He was also required to turn over computers, hard drives, CD-roms, DVDs, USB sticks, or any other storage devices on which the circumvention devices are stored.

Hotz objected to that last part, but Judge Illston was not having it. "Here, I find probable cause that your client has got these things on his computer," she said, according to Wired. "It's a problem when more than one thing is kept on the computer. I'll make sure the order is and will be that Sony is only entitled to isolate the information on the computer that relates to the hacking of the PlayStation."

Earlier in January, lawyers representing Hotz argued that he hacked the PS3 to add back a feature that Sony had removed.

Hotz, the lawyers claimed, "re-enabled" OtherOS functionality, or the ability to dual-boot the PlayStation 3 using some other OS, such as Linux.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Egypt Move Revives US 'Kill Switch' Debate

Egypt's five-day shutdown of the Internet has revived debate in the United States over how much authority the president should have over the Web in the event of a crisis.

Some opponents of cybersecurity legislation wending its way through the US Congress have condemned the bill as a danger to free speech and civil liberties that would equip the White House with an Internet "kill switch."

Supporters deny it would confer any such power on the president.

As Hosni Mubarak cut his 80 million people off from the Web, the US senators behind the legislation denounced the move by the Egyptian president as "totally wrong" and leapt to the defense of their bill.

"(Mubarak's) actions were clearly designed to limit internal criticisms of his government," said Joe Lieberman, an independent from Connecticut, Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine, and Tom Carper, a Democrat from Delaware.

"Our cybersecurity legislation is intended to protect the US from external cyberattacks," Lieberman, chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Collins and Carper said in a joint statement.

"We would never sign on to legislation that authorized the president, or anyone else, to shut down the Internet," they said. "Emergency or no, the exercise of such broad authority would be an affront to our Constitution."

At the same time, the senators continued, "our current laws do give us reason to be concerned" and their bill, which has yet to reach the Senate floor, was designed to replace "broad and ambiguous" presidential authority with "precise and targeted" powers to be used only in a national emergency.

In June, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union and some two dozen other privacy, civil liberties and civil rights groups wrote a letter to Lieberman, Collins and Carper to express concern about the bill.

"Changes are needed to ensure that cybersecurity measures do not unnecessarily infringe on free speech, privacy, and other civil liberties interests," they said.

"The Internet is vital to free speech and free inquiry, and Americans rely on it every day to access and to convey information," the groups said. "It is imperative that cybersecurity legislation not erode our rights."

Taking note of the concerns, Lieberman, Collins and Carper said "we will ensure that any legislation that moves in this Congress contains explicit language prohibiting the president from doing what President Mubarak did."

"Our bill already contains protections to prevent the president from denying Americans access to the Internet - even as it provides ample authority to ensure that those most critical services that rely on the Internet are protected," they said.

Cindy Cohn, the EFF's legal director and general counsel, said the latest version of the cybersecurity legislation was an improvement on its "draconian predecessors" but remained wary.

"The Egyptian regime's shutdown of the Internet in an attempt to preserve its political power highlights the dangers of any government having unchecked power over our Internet infrastructure," Cohn said in a blog post.

"The lesson of Egypt is that no one, not even the President of the United States, should be given the power to turn off the Internet.

"(Egypt's move) puts a fine point on the risks to democracy posed by recent Congressional proposals to give the president a broad mandate to dictate how our Internet service providers respond to cyber-emergencies," she said.

"Any proposal to give the president the ability to interfere with Internet access of Americans - whether to address cyberattacks or for any other reason - must be tightly circumscribed," she said.

"It must be limited to situations where there are serious and demonstrable external security threats and must be strongly checked by both Congressional and court review."

James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the cybersecurity bill sets the threshold for invoking the presidential powers "very, very high."

"It's not some arbitrary power to turn off the Internet," Lewis told AFP. "It's an authority consistent with other wartime authorities to act in an emergency."

"It's not an Internet kill switch," he said. "That's just insane. How do you kill a globally distributed network with millions of devices?"

"The answer is you don't," Lewis continued. "But you can think about isolating certain domains or certain enterprises."

"Say a big power company gets infected," Lewis said. "You say to them 'Disconnect yourself before you infect other power companies.' It's like an avian flu quarantine for the Internet."

"It's not like Egypt where the dictator wakes up in a bad mood and does it," he said. "It would be a legitimate process. It would have to be the threshold of an act of war or a major terrorist event."

Anti-Computer Hacking Bill Coming in Congress

Strengthening cybersecurity is the goal of legislation being introduced in Congress after reports of hack attacks on computer networks at Nasdaq OMX Group and at oil and gas companies.

"Cyber-threats are not on the horizon, they are upon us," Democratic Senator Robert Menendez, who is introducing the bill, said in a statement on Thursday.

The bipartisan Cybersecurity Enhancement Act would fund more cybersecurity research, awareness and education.

"Businesses and investors must trust that their investments are secure. We cannot allow security breaches to undermine our trust in the U.S. economy," said Menendez, from New Jersey.

Hackers working in China broke into computer systems of five multinational oil and gas companies to steal bidding plans and other critical information, computer security firm McAfee Inc said on Thursday.

Nasdaq OMX, operator of the Nasdaq Stock Market, said over the weekend that it had found "suspicious files" on its U.S. computer servers and determined that hackers could have affected one of its Internet-based client applications.

Nasdaq OMX said there was no evidence that the hackers obtained customer information or that any of the company's trading platforms were compromised.

Menendez and other lawmakers have urged regulators to look into the incidents and report back to Congress.

US Lawmaker Unveils Internet, Finance Privacy Bills

Cheered on by civil liberties advocates and consumer groups, a US lawmaker introduced legislation Friday to help safeguard Internet users' privacy and rein in dissemination of personal financial data.

"These two bills send a clear message - privacy over profit," Democratic Representative Jackie Speier said as she unveiled the Do Not Track Me Online Act and the Financial Information Privacy Act of 2011.

"Consumers have a right to determine what if any of their information is shared with big corporations and the federal government must have the authority and tools to enforce reasonable protections," she said.

The first bill would direct the US Federal Trade Commission to develop a mechanism for consumers to be able to opt out of having their online activity tracked, stored, or shared and require companies to abide by that decision.

The American Civil Liberties Union hailed the legislation, with legislative counsel Christopher Calabrese saying: "Signing on to the Internet shouldn't mean signing away your privacy."

"It's crucial that Americans have as much control over their online privacy as possible and this bill is a welcome and important first step toward that goal," Calabrese said in a statement.

The second bill aimed to give consumers more control over whether and how financial institutions share or sell personal, non-public information.

It would enable people to opt out of such sharing between a parent company and an affiliate, and require that consumers explicitly opt-in to allow a firm to share such information with an unaffiliated third party.

Activists on Facebook Need Protection

Facebook has become an important tool for democracy and human rights activists and it needs to do more to protect them, including allowing the use of pseudonyms, a US senator said Thursday.

"Recent events in Egypt and Tunisia have again highlighted the significant costs and benefits of social networking technology like Facebook to democracy and human rights activists," Senator Dick Durbin said in a letter to Facebook co-founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg.

"I commend you for providing an important tool to democracy and human-rights activists," the Democrat from Illinois said.

"However, as millions of people around the world use Facebook to exercise their freedom of expression, I am concerned that the company does not have

adequate safeguards in place to protect human rights and avoid being exploited by repressive governments," Durbin said.

"Facebook has facilitated efforts by activists to organize demonstrations and publicize human-rights abuses," he said.

"At the same time, the Egyptian and Tunisian governments have reportedly used Facebook to monitor activists, which is surely aided by Facebook's refusal to allow activists to use pseudonyms," the senator said, citing Belarus, China, and Iran as other countries using social networking to track activists.

Durbin repeated a call for Facebook, which has nearly 600 million users, to join the Global Network Initiative (GNI), which has drafted a voluntary code of conduct to protect human rights and whose members include Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!

Responding to the senator's letter, Andrew Noyes, a Facebook spokesman, said "the trust people place in us is the most important part of what makes Facebook work.

"As demonstrated by our response to threats in Tunisia, we take this trust seriously and work aggressively every single day to protect people," he said.

As for pseudonyms, Noyes said: "Facebook has always been based on a real name culture, and we fundamentally believe this leads to greater accountability and a safer and more trusted environment for people who use the service."

Referring to the appeal to join GNI, Noyes said, "as Facebook grows, we'll absolutely be considering which groups we can actively participate in but it's important to remember that our global operations are still small, with offices in only a handful of countries."

New HP Laptops Put an Axe to the Click Touchpads

Sayonara, Clickpads. That's the part that resonated loudest from HP's latest updates to its Pavilion laptops. It wasn't the new designs, latest Intel processors, or the fact that it boosted sound with an extra pair of speakers above the keyboard; ditching the infamous Clickpads, the touchpad design every Pavilion used for the last year, in favor of a dedicated mouse button model, was the big takeaway here.

The Clickpad model was flawed from the moment HP started using it in its netbooks and Envy line, and soon after it appeared in every Pavilion model. It was influenced, no doubt, by Apple: An oversized touchpad that integrated the mouse buttons is something customers perceived as fashionable and clean-looking. Problem is, merging the two resulted in accidental cursor movement and touch gestures appearing when they shouldn't. There have been countless software driver fixes from Synaptics, the company that makes these Clickpads, but none that have really fixed the problem completely. So HP went with new hardware.

The new touchpads feature a left and right dedicated mouse button, bringing back the classic touchpad model. Except this time, HP enlarged the touchpad itself so that it looked as big as the previous Clickpad. I

spent some time with a Pavilion dv6 and came away very pleased with the new touchpad. It's like a heavy burden had been lifted.

Of course, there's more to these new Pavilions than the new touchpad. New designs, consisting of decorated plastic and metal, will be available to customers (the previous Pavilions had etched metal designs only). A glowing LED light that surrounds the touchpad is now a feature customers can add. For audiophiles, HP added a speaker bar above the keyboard, in addition to the two that reside in the front bezel, for a 4-speaker system. Each Pavilion laptop will also be equipped with Beats Audio, a combination of hardware and software that enhances audio quality. A numeric keypad has been added to the dv6 models, and two of the four USB ports are colored in blue, which means they have the USB 3.0 spec (10 times the speeds of USB 2.0).

CoolSense is another marketing catch-term you'll be seeing a lot of in HP's new Pavilions. It encompasses component placement, such as placing heat-dissipating parts away from the palm rest area. The vents, meanwhile, are placed to the sides and direct heat away from the laptop. HP's Thermal Assistant software allows you to choose your cooling preferences and uses the laptop's built-in accelerometer to detect when the laptop is moving, so it automatically chooses the coolest setting.

This technology will come in handy, particularly if you configure a Pavilion with one of Intel's Sandy Bridge Core i7 quad core processors. Dual core versions will be available, as will AMD processors. Since HP is an AMD proponent, all Pavilions going forward will use an ATI Mobility Radeon 6000 series graphics chip, if the occasion calls for a discrete graphics chip.

The Pavilion dv6 and dv7 will be available on February 27, starting at \$749.99 and \$999.99, respectively.

iPad 2 Announcement In February?

Apple could be unveiling the second-generation iPad at a small, closed developer's event next week, according to reports.

Citing sources from the accessories business, MacNotes.de claims Apple is unveiling the second-generation iPad next week, during a launch event of iOS 4.3 for the AT&T iPhone. However as PC Mag noted earlier, leaks from accessory makers should be treated with a grain of salt.

Meanwhile Japanese tech blog macotakara.jp, citing no one in particular, also claimed that Apple was holding a "small event" to introduce the second-generation iPad. The event wouldn't take place until the end of the Lunar New Year on February 17, however, as most of Apple's suppliers and manufacturers in Asia were off for the holiday. Makotakara also said Apple was launching the tablet in March.

Unless all these publications are talking to the same person, these rumors seem to confirm a report in January. 9To5 Mac discovered that after uploading iOS 4.3 beta, which Apple released in January to developers, its iCalendar automatically flipped to February 9th. The blogosphere was suddenly filled with rumors of a February 9th announcement for the iPad 2.

A beta version of iOS 4.3 was released to developers at the end of January.

Most reports say a full release won't be available until March.

Separately there were plenty of other alleged iPad 2 sightings last week to satisfy the even most eager iPad 2 beaver, from sightings of the screen to a patent for a stylus to front- and rear- facing cameras; even the tablet itself was supposedly spotted at the launch of Rupert Murdoch's Daily app on Wednesday.

Mozilla Releasing Firefox 4, 5, 6, and 7 in 2011?

With the browser wars turning in favor of Google's upstart Chrome's favor, Firefox's leadership has decided that imitation is the highest form of flattery. At least when it comes to release schedules. The Mozilla Wiki currently lists "ship Firefox 4, 5, 6 and 7" among its goals for the 2011 calendar year.

One of the many groundbreaking and remarkable things about Google's browser is that a new version has shipped an new version at an average of every three months. Most other browser makers, including Firefox up till now, have only deemed an update worthy of a new version number after a couple of years.

Surprisingly, such a major change wasn't mentioned on the Firefox blog or on Mozilla's press center site. One of the first sites to report the change was DownloadSquad, which also notes in an update that the roadmap's status is marked "draft," meaning it hasn't been finalized, so the plan may not come to pass. A Mozilla rep told PCMag.com that it was updated back in December, though it's just hitting the consciousness of the Internet today.

The Roadmap, authored by Firefox director Mike Beltzner, is prefaced by this mission statement: "We succeeded in re-energizing the browser market, creating competition and innovation which benefits Web application developers and users alike. This newly competitive market has presented challenges for the continued success of Firefox, and in 2011 we must ensure that we can deliver a product that is compelling to users in order to continue to be able to demonstrate our vision for the Web. This roadmap outlines our planned strategy and direction for Firefox in 2011."

Firefox 4 has been in the works for over a year, is likely to be released next month, and its features are well known. But for the heretofore unknown future versions, the emphases will be as follows:

*Firefox 5 *

- * Account Manager
- * Simple Sharing UI
- * UI Animation
- * 64 Bit on Windows

Firefox 6:

- * Web Applications
- * FasterCache
- * OSX 10.7
- * JS Optimizations

*Firefox 7 *

* e10s? deXBLification?

Beltzer adds that each version should add "anything that improves responsiveness and is ready, anything that improves stability and is ready, anything that polishes the user interface and is ready, and anything else serving product priorities and is ready." But no projected dates are included on the road map.

In a section titled, "How to ship faster," Beltzner writes that the team must "take a hard look at our existing systems and re-evaluate some of the assumptions we take as immutable." These include concern for add-ons, older branches of code, localization, formal code review, and giving every code contributor equal say.

It's an ambitious undertaking, but it's good to see Mozilla doing something to attack its stagnant user growth, which came close to 25 percent of all Internet users, but never quite made the mark, thanks to the arrival of Chrome. Having a \$200 billion company behind its development effort hasn't hurt Google Chrome, but it's not a guarantee that a feisty, well-organized volunteer-assisted project like Firefox can't come out on top.

Microsoft Releases Near-Final Web Browser Version

Microsoft Corp. released a near-final version of Internet Explorer 9 on Thursday, saying the updates make the Web browser even better at tapping into a computer's powerful processors to help multimedia-laden websites load and run faster.

IE9 is a free download that works Windows Vista and Windows 7 computers. It's not compatible with Windows XP.

With IE9, Microsoft followed the visual lead of Google Inc.'s Chrome browser. IE9 has far fewer buttons, icons and toolbars filling the screen, leaving more room for the contents of Web pages. It mimics some features in Windows 7, the newest PC operating software from Microsoft, in that it lets people "pin" individual websites to the taskbar at the bottom of the PC screen to make permanent one-click shortcuts.

Based on feedback from the beta version, which Microsoft said was used by 25 million people, the software will let people add a new row of tabs to the bar at the top of the browser window. It will also pop up fewer notifications.

The new browser is much more than an aesthetic overhaul. IE9 can take advantage of multicore microprocessors to crunch website code faster. It also uses the PC's graphics processing unit - the same chips that make the images in elaborate video games run smoothly - to make movie clips and other visuals load and play faster.

Microsoft said Thursday that it has improved several aspects of the browser that make it run faster than the beta that was released in September. It fine-tuned the engine for rendering JavaScript, a widely used Web programming language, so pages load faster. IE9 now also

decides on the fly when to tap into the graphics processor for more speed.

Competitors including Google and Mozilla, maker of the Firefox browser, are also working on similar technical upgrades to their software. This new crop of browsers will be competing with "apps," small programs for smart phones, tablets and other devices that deliver the some of the same content as websites but in a way that's easier to navigate on smaller screens.

Why Browser 'Do Not Track' Features Won't Work

Mozilla, Microsoft, and Google have each developed some sort of "do not track" feature for their respective Web browsers. The intent is good, but each solution is fundamentally flawed and is unlikely to work very well in the real world.

Following the call for action from the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to create some sort of a Web browsing "do not track" list similar to the "do not call" list consumers can use to avoid being harassed by telemarketers, the major browser vendors took some initiative and got to work.

Microsoft announced availability of the Internet Explorer 9 release candidate - the final evaluation version before the official release of the browser. The IE9 RC includes Microsoft's solution to the Web tracking issue. The problem with Microsoft's approach, though, is that it relies too heavily on user intervention - requiring the user essentially to manage which sites should or shouldn't be allowed to track browsing behavior.

Google's approach is not an inherent feature of the Chrome browser, but is offered instead as a "Keep My Opt-Outs" browser extension. Not only does the Google solution require the user to be aware of the extension and add it, but the ability of the extension to thwart online tracking efforts relies on the self-regulating efforts of the advertising companies responsible for the tracking.

Then, there is Mozilla's "do not track" solution. The Mozilla feature has been added to the latest beta release of Firefox 4. If enabled, Firefox will add information to HTTP requests from the browser letting Web sites know that the user wishes not to be tracked...assuming the Web site is paying attention and chooses to care.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) backs the Mozilla solution. An EFF spokesperson e-mailed me to comment. "The Do Not Track approach endorsed by the FTC and now Mozilla is a great idea. It's technically elegant and will serve as a platform for further privacy innovation. Yes, parallel efforts will still be needed to combat online scams, phishing and privacy-invading malware (and also to protect people who don't use Do Not Track) but this is a major step in the right direction."

It may be technically elegant, but it's fatal flaw is that it depends on the Web sites in question to A) be looking for the HTTP header data, and B) be reputable enough to honor the "do not track" request. Those are some major hurdles that make Mozilla's technical elegance impractical in function.

Doug Wolfgram, CEO of IntelliProtect, an online privacy management company, agrees that the Mozilla solution is flawed. Wolfgram e-mailed me to say, "The Mozilla solution is only as effective as the companies who embrace it which so far is none. It appears as though it sets a header, meaning opt out of ALL sites who embrace it or none, no real consumer choice for whom they want to allow to track."

In response to my criticisms of the Mozilla approach, the EFF spokesperson explained, "The tracking we're most worried about is conducted by large third-party domains. These are giant sites that are tracking most of us, most of the time, but we never see them because they're hidden inside iframes and JavaScript beacons in the pages we're looking at. Among those very large domains, we believe it will be comparatively easy to determine which ones do and don't respect the Do Not Track header."

Wolfgram also pointed out another serious obstacle. "Many behavioral targeting companies are based outside the US - making legislation ineffective. Right now, those within the US must voluntarily comply." Wolfgram added that solutions which take an all or nothing approach don't give consumers enough control.

The good news is that the FTC and the major browser vendors are aware that there is a problem and are all actively working on solving it. The bad news is that these initial stabs fall short of the goal, and that it would be better if all parties would agree on a single, standard solution.

Anti-Spam Search Engine Blekko Averaging 1 Million Queries Per Day

Blekko's alternative, human-curated search engine now averages 1 million queries a day and between 10 to 15 queries per second just three months after launch, according to January figures the startup released Monday.

Blekko's secret sauce is its slashtags - topic tags auto-fired or appended by users to queries to limit search results to those from curated sets of websites. Blekko is reporting that there are now more than 110,000 human-curated slashtags.

Blekko CEO Rich Skrenta sees the figure as proof that the slashtag approach is resonating with users. "We're happy at how quickly users have adopted the idea of a new search engine and have created so many quality slashtags just three months since launch," he says.

With 66.6% market share in the U.S., search is Google's domain to lose. Blekko's plan of attack has been crafting a narrative that paints the upstart as renegade, most recently by eliminating all results from 20 content farm sites it labelled as spam.

In previous conversations, both Skrenta and Blekko founder Mike Markson appeared grounded in the reality that Blekko would not be making a dent in Google's search share anytime soon. Still, at launch, the pair shared that Blekko's model is such that it could be a profitable company at 1 million to 2 million queries per day. Having hit the smaller end of the spectrum, the question is whether the startup will begin to employ ads on the currently pristine site to start generating revenue.

Blekko has raised \$24 million since being founded in 2007. Earlier this month, the startup released an iPhone and Android application with

features similar to those available on the web.

Best Buy Launches Electronics 'Buy Back' Program

Timing is everything when shopping for gadgets. That's because there's always a possibility that a new version of the smart phone, tablet or other electronic gear will be released soon after you make a purchase.

To allay such fears, Best Buy Inc. launched its new "Buy Back" program in a Super Bowl ad featuring aging heavy metal star Ozzy Osbourne and teen pop sensation Justin Bieber. Under the program, the electronics retailer agrees to buy back certain products within a limited time. Customers can get a partial refund based on how quickly they return the item.

Best Buy is touting its buyback plan as a way to "future proof" purchases. But it comes with costs and catches you should examine carefully.

For now, the buyback plan is free. But after Feb. 12, here's what it will cost:

- * Laptops, netbooks and tablets: \$69.99.
- * Mobile phones: \$39.99 to \$59.99 depending on the price
- * TVs: \$59.99 to \$349.99 depending on the price

And depending on when the item is returned, here's how much of the purchase price customers get back:

- * Within 6 months - up to 50 percent
- * Between 6 and 12 months - up to 40 percent
- * Between 12 and 18 months - up to 30 percent
- * Between 18 and 24 months - up to 20 percent
- * Between 24 and 48 months (only TVs are eligible) - up to 10 percent

So to obtain buyback protection for a \$600 iPad, customers would pay \$69.99. If it's returned in less than six months, they would get \$300 back. If they returned it in six months to a year, they'd get \$240 back, and so on.

For mobile phones, the amount refunded is based on the retail value of the phone, even if the customer paid a special discount price.

It's worth noting that the refunds aren't made in cash, but are issued on Best Buy gift cards. To get the maximum buy back amount listed, customers also need to return the item in good condition with all of the accessories it came with. Otherwise the refund may be reduced or even denied.

That said, products can be returned for any reason. So even if customers aren't coveting a new upgrade, Best Buy will take the item off their

hands.

And if the item is returned within Best Buy's standard return policy window, it's also possible to get a refund of the buyback plan purchase too.

Facebook and Google Size Up Takeover of Twitter

Google Inc. and Facebook Inc, plus others, have held low level takeover talks with Twitter that give the Internet sensation a value as high as \$10 billion, the Wall Street Journal reported.

In December, Twitter raised \$200 million in financing in a deal that valued it at \$3.7 billion. The company, which allows users to broadcast 140-character messages to groups of followers, had 175 million users as of September.

The Wall Street Journal reported on its website that executives at Twitter have held "low level" talks with executives at Facebook and Google in recent months about a possible takeover of Twitter.

Citing people familiar with the matter, the WSJ said other companies have also held similar talks.

"But what's remarkable is the money that people familiar with the matter say frames the discussions with at least some potential suitors; an estimated valuation in the neighborhood of \$8 billion to \$10 billion," the report said.

The paper said the talks have so far gone nowhere and that Google, Facebook and Twitter all declined to comment.

Despite the valuation, the report said Twitter's executives and board were working on building a large, independent company.

"People familiar with the situation said the company believes it can grow into a \$100 billion company," the WSJ said.

Twitter, created in 2006, is among a crop of popular Internet social networking services that includes Facebook, Zynga and LinkedIn.

A growing secondary market has developed in shares of the privately held Web sensations and investors are monitoring the companies closely in the hope they might float shares.

It was only in the middle of 2010 that Twitter offered marketers a way to advertise on the service.

Industry research firm eMarketer said last month that Twitter, which doesn't disclose financial information, generated an estimated \$45 million from advertising in 2010 and is expected to generate some \$150 million this year.

Google, the world's number 1 Internet search engine, generated roughly \$29 billion in revenue in 2010 and Facebook, recently valued at \$50 billion, produced about \$1.9 billion, eMarketer said.

SFTC Asked To Investigate Kids and In-App Purchases

Do in-app purchases take advantage of children and inadvertently cost parents way more money than they intended to spend? US Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA) is worried that they do, and he has asked the Federal Trade Commission to look at the in-app purchase process offered by Apple and Google to see whether games that offer in-app purchases are unfairly marketed towards kids.

Stories about children inadvertently spending thousands of dollars inside of their parents' iPhone apps have circulated around the Web over the last year or so. Parents need to enter a password the first time in order to authorize a purchase (or an app download), but iOS devices don't ask for the password again until some period of time has passed, leaving eager kids to their own devices if parents aren't careful. When kids get authorization, they sometimes go crazy buying new items inside of their favorite games, surprising their parents with an eventual bill.

This phenomenon is hardly new, though it has gained more attention recently thanks to coverage from the mainstream press. That coverage is what led Markey to pen his letter to the FTC, asking it to review the issue and possibly educate consumers about the dangers of in-app purchases. He also asked the Commission to determine whether Apple, Google, and app developers are engaging in deceptive marketing practices when they advertise games to kids.

"I am disturbed by news that in-app purchases may be taking advantage of children's lack of understanding when it comes to money and what it means to 'buy' an imaginary game piece on the Web. Companies shouldn't be able to use Smurfs and snowflakes and zoos as online ATMs pulling money from the pockets of unsuspecting parents," Markey said in a statement accompanying his letter.

"The use of mobile apps will continue to escalate, which is why it is critical that more is done now to examine these practices. I will continue to closely monitor this issue and look forward to the FTC's response."

Google only recently introduced its own in-app purchasing system for Android, so the current problem group is mostly made up of iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch users. Apple doesn't currently offer a setting that reduces the amount of time between password requests, but it does offer parental controls that let parents turn off in-app purchases altogether. Of course, choosing this option will mean that no app will be able to make in-app purchases (whether an adult is using them or not), but until a better solution becomes available, those settings can be found under Settings > General > Restrictions.

Russian Hacker Admits Guilt in \$10 Million Cyber Theft

A Russian man has pleaded guilty in court to stealing \$10 million from former Royal Bank of Scotland division World Pay in 2008 by hacking into accounts, RIA News reported on Monday.

Investigators said 27-year-old Yevgeny Anikin was a member of an international hacking ring that copied client account information and boosted the daily maximum withdrawal limit before taking cash out of bank machines across Europe, Asia and the United States.

"I want to say that I repent and fully admit my guilt," Anikin in his final comments to the court in Novosibirsk in Siberia, where he was charged with theft.

Anikin, who was detained in 2009, bought two apartments in Novosibirsk as well as a luxury car.

Russia has produced some of the world's most renowned hackers, including the programmer who wrote Zeus, a malicious software introduced as spyware that hides in computers and logs keystrokes to steal passwords. The software has helped steal an estimated \$10 million.

Anikin, who is currently under house arrest, asked the judge for leniency in sentencing, saying he had already started paying back the money to the company. RBS Group sold World Pay in 2010 to a consortium of Advent International and Bain Capital.

Another member of the hacker ring was sentenced by a St. Petersburg court to six years in prison in September 2010.

The judge in the case, Lyubov Nazarov, said the verdict and sentence would be announced either on Monday or Friday.

License To Tweet? UK May Restrict Posts from Court

English courts may restrict the public's freedom to post Twitter updates from inside hearings to avoid the risk of prejudicing trials, the head of the judiciary in England and Wales said Monday.

In a consultation report on the use of smart phones and live, text-based communications from court, Justice Igor Judge's office said in some instances only members of the press - not the public - attending court may be permitted to use Twitter.

"The combination of instant reporting without the self-restraint presumed to be exercised by accredited members of the media might lead to a greater likelihood of prejudicial reporting," the report said.

It added that the risks of the public sending tweets may be amplified by their informal nature, as they "usually involve less measured remarks, which are presented in a manner which invites commentary and opinion from other users, and are posted in real time with no opportunity for review."

The report follows concern that members of the public don't have knowledge of media law and could post updates that fall foul of the rules. In Britain, television cameras are not permitted to broadcast criminal cases.

The report said that courts could restrict Twitter use to accredited reporters, or consider applications from the public on a case by case basis.

The consultation report is meant to gather public opinion after a judge issued interim guidance in December that there was no ban on using Twitter in court - but that users would have to seek the judge's permission first. Such permission could be refused in criminal trials if there is a risk that information posted on Twitter might influence witnesses or jurors.

In the U.S., federal courts tell jurors to avoid Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites, but deciding whether journalists can tweet or blog from court has generally been left up to judges. Relatively few federal courts have embraced Twitter, although last year a federal judge in Kansas allowed a reporter to use the microblogging service to provide updates from a gang trial.

Digital Equipment Corp. Co-founder Ken Olsen Dies at Age 84

Kenneth Olsen, the computer industry pioneer who co-founded minicomputer maker Digital Equipment Corp., died at the age of 84 on Sunday.

Olsen will be remembered for the key role he played in at least one technology revolution: the move from mainframes to minicomputers.

Olsen entered electronics school for a year during his time in the Navy. Working as a technician in the service, Olsen's knowledge and passion for electronics grew.

During his time at MIT after the Navy, Olsen designed the Whirlwind computer, the first real-time computer. Olsen was on the staff of the MIT Digital Computer Laboratory for seven years.

Outfitted with a \$70,000 investment from General Georges F. Doriot at the American Research and Development Corp., Olsen co-founded Digital Equipment Corp. (DEC) with fellow MIT graduate Harlan Anderson in Maynard, Massachusetts, in 1957. The company began to develop the first small interactive computer and producing printed circuit logic modules, which were used to test electronic equipment.

Olsen served as president of the company from its founding in 1957 until his retirement in 1992. In 1960 DEC produced the PDP-1. DEC flourished with the PDP-8, the world's first mass-produced mini-computer, which was manufactured from 1965 to 1984. The PDP-11, produced by DEC in 1970, became the most popular minicomputer line in history.

Olsen left Digital in 1992, essentially forced out as young executives of the PC era usurped the authority of the generation that ushered in the minicomputer.

Olsen was known to be a blunt speaker on occasion. As corporate IT spread beyond the confines of IS departments in the 1980s and 1990s, he could be critical of people who were not steeped in technology. "The whole world's gone crazy because all of the software and all of the marketing are run by people who've never operated a business," Olsen said in an interview with the IDG News Service in 1998, six years after he left Digital.

He advocated a balanced approach to management, however. "The first

problem is to try to get people to organize (businesses) with wisdom, with common sense," he said, in the 1998 interview.

Sharing his passion for computers with the public, Olsen co-founded the Computer Museum, originally located in Marlborough, Massachusetts, in 1979. The museum later moved to Boston. In 1999 the museum closed, but many of its exhibits are now part of the Boston Museum of Science. He was named a fellow of the Computer History Museum in Silicon Valley.

Olsen has received many awards, including the MCI Communications Information Technology Leadership Award for Innovation, the Founder's Medal from the IEEE and the National Medal of Technology.

*Curriculum Vitae: *

1926 - Born in Stratford, Connecticut, on February 20

1944 - Entered the Navy

1950 - Graduated from MIT with a B.S. in electrical engineering

1952 - Awarded an M.A. in electrical engineering by MIT

1957 - Co-founded Digital Equipment Corp. (DEC)

1979 - Co-founded Boston's Computer Museum

1990 - Inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame

1992 - Retired from his position as President of DEC

Feds Settle Case of Woman Fired over Facebook Site

Employers should think twice before trying to restrict workers from talking about their jobs on Facebook or other social media.

That's the message the government sent on Monday as it settled a closely watched lawsuit against a Connecticut ambulance company that fired an employee after she went on Facebook to criticize her boss.

The National Labor Relations Board sued the company last year, arguing the worker's negative comments were protected speech under federal labor laws. The company claimed it fired the emergency medical technician because of complaints about her work.

Under the settlement with the labor board, American Medical Response of Connecticut Inc. agreed to change its blogging and Internet policy that barred workers from disparaging the company or its supervisors. The company also will revise another policy that prohibited employees from depicting the company in any way over the Internet without permission.

Both policies interfered with longstanding legal protections that allow workers to discuss wages, hours and working conditions with co-workers, the board said.

"I think it certainly sends a message about what the NLRB views the law to be," said Jonathan Kreisberg, the NLRB regional director in Hartford

who approved the settlement.

"The fact that they agreed to revise their rules so that they're not so overly restrictive of the rights of employees to discuss their terms and conditions with others and with their fellow employees is the most significant thing that comes out of this," Kreisberg said.

Terms of a private settlement agreement between the employee, Dawnmarie Souza, and the company were not disclosed, but Kreisberg said the parties reached a financial settlement. Souza will not be returning to work there.

Souza declined a request for comment. A representative for American Medical Response did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

Souza posted the Facebook comments in 2009 from her home computer, hours after her supervisor said a customer had complained about her work. The expletive-filled posting referred to her supervisor using the company's code for a psychiatric patient. Her remarks at the time drew supportive posts from colleagues.

Chuck Cohen, a labor and employment lawyer and former NLRB member during the Clinton administration, said the case will have employers around the country re-examining their Internet policies

"It clearly has resonance because we know the NLRB's general counsel is going to take this position," Cohen said.

But Cohen warned that the case doesn't give employees free rein to discuss anything work-related on social media.

"The line can go over to disloyalty or disclosure of truly confidential information," Cohen said. "This is not without boundaries, but we just don't have a good sense yet of where the boundaries are."

Millions of Americans use Facebook, Twitter and other social media. Kreisberg said the board is looking at a growing number of complaints that explore the limits of corporate Internet policies. The board is an independent agency that supervises union elections, referees labor-management disputes and works to prevent unfair labor practices in the private sector.

Sara Begley, a Philadelphia-based employment lawyer, says image-conscious companies may be taken by surprise that the law protecting employees who want to discuss working conditions extends to social media sites, which can potentially be viewed by thousands or even millions of people.

"I think it's a natural evolution that the law is being broadly interpreted to include social media considering that it's become one of the most prevalent methods of communication," she said.

Ken and Barbie's Fate Put to Facebook Vote

Facebook users are being asked to vote on whether one of the most iconic US couples ever should be reunited after a seven-year split.

Barbie and Ken, two half-century-old dolls marketed by the world's biggest toy company, Mattel, split on Valentine's Day 2004 after 43 years together, and now the public is being asked to weigh in on whether they belong together.

After the big break-up, Barbie began a dalliance with an Australian surfer dude-doll called Blaine and Ken dumped his role as Barbie's eternal sidekick and "stepped out in a big way," Mattel says on the Facebook page for the two dolls.

Ken went on to win critical acclaim for his role in Toy Story 3, and also made appearances at Fashion Week in New York, the page says.

But even as he revelled in his new-found celebrity, Ken's aim was always to win back Barbie, Mattel says.

"Having explored the singles scene after his starring role in Toy Story 3, Ken now knows Barbie is the only doll for him," Mattel said in a statement outlining some of the "epic romantic gestures" the boy doll is making to win back his girl.

One of those gestures is by professing his love for Barbie on billboards in New York and Los Angeles, one of which reads: "Barbie, We May Be Plastic But Our Love is Real."

Mattel is now asking fans of the two dolls, who have retained their youthful good looks and seamlessly changed with the times, to vote on either doll's Facebook page or on barbieandken.com to determine if they should get back together.

Ken reportedly wants to win back Barbie by Valentine's Day, in a week's time.

There was no word Monday on how the poll was going or what Blaine's fate would be if Barbie goes back to Ken.

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